

Interview

## Rita Gutiérrez: "There is not one type of autistic kid: all of them are different"



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Rita Gutiérrez, International volunteer in Mes Kitokie center.

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Disables and autistic kids playing in Mes Kitokie center.

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Mes Kitokie logo.

Rita Gutiérrez is an anthropologist and is now in Mes Kitokie center in Kaunas, Lithuania. She is volunteering with disabled and autistic children as an international volunteer. We asked her about her experience.

### **Had you ever volunteered with disabled children before heading to Kaunas?**

I was willing to do a European volunteering program, and so I applied for this one. I had previously done other kinds of volunteering, but this is my first time working with children with intellectual disabilities. My little brother has an intellectual disability, and that's where my interest comes from.

### **How long have you been in Lithuania so far?**

I've been here for six months and a half now, since the 1st of October, and I'm planning to stay here until July. I have learned a lot during my stay, so far, not only from the work I do here but also from the colleagues I'm spending time with.

At first everything was a mess, because I didn't speak any Lithuanian and I had to use mimics to communicate with the children. Now I already know some Lithuanian words and expressions and my communication with the workers and the kids has improved. Among other things, I have learnt that there is not one type of autistic kid: all of them are different.

### **Do you only work with autistic children?**

No. In the center there are 2 or 3 autistic kids, but there are also hyperactive kids and kids who have a range of emotional problems. I also spend time with kids who have Down Syndrome and children who don't have any kinds of disability but who are in adverse situations: there is a girl who has just been adopted and has trouble adapting to her new family and friends, for instance. This Easter we will host more children, because we are currently organizing an Easter camp. We are going to host 9 or 10 kids, we are going to do many artistic activities and we have some excursions planned.

### **Are there many International volunteers like you, in the Kaunas?**

In the center I just work with Lithuanians and local volunteers. I'm the only International volunteer. At first the linguistic barrier was a problem, but now that I speak a bit Lithuanian things are easier for me. When I first arrived workers would send me back home, because they didn't know how I could help them; besides, kids used to push me away (one of them even tried to break my glasses!). I would come home and cry, thinking all the children there hated me. But later I became more proactive and I told the workers I had no intention to go home, because I was there to help. Then I even gave them some ideas I had. Now I know how to treat the boys and girls, and when they see me they come and hug me. They still throw toys at me, though (chuckles).

### **Tell me about the children in Mes Kitokie center in Kaunas.**

They need affection, because many of them don't have any friends in school. There is an autistic kid who is only on his own; he usually goes to his bedroom and spends his time jumping on his bed.

However, the other day he came running to me and he called me by my name, Rita, and I thought he didn't even know my name! He also shared some chocolate with the other kids. I have seen this kid evolve during my stay here, and this makes me really happy.

### **Would you recommend the experience?**

Of course! I would recommend it in spite of the difficulties. The only requisites are being proactive, daring to propose your ideas and stop thinking your ideas are not worth discussing.

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